Stop! Don't Share That Story!:
Designing a Pop-Up Undergraduate Workshop on Fake News

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Identifying the Need

As the issue of "fake news" came to prominence in the fall of 2016, it became clear that many people in our society are falling victim to false or misleading information meant to manipulate or confirm their beliefs about current events. We recognize that educators at all levels need to respond to this crisis, but, as librarians, we are particularly well versed in teaching the skills our students need to critically analyze the credibility of information.

Fake news is a complicated problem without an easy solution. Blame can be laid equally on the changing nature of the news publishing industry, increasing political polarization and bias at all levels of society, and, finally, the changing habits of information consumers in an era of easy access to online media.

Taking this into account and after brainstorming possible topics for our series of pop-ups, we sent a survey to the students of Florida Southern through OrgSync, a student engagement network and message board, asking them to choose which topic was of greatest interest to them; "Fake News" was their top choice.

Why Social Media?

In 2017, the Pew Research Center (Shearer & Gottfried, 2017) found that two-thirds of American adults get some or all of their news from social media. As Spratt & Agosto (2017) note, this leaves social media users vulnerable to unreliable sources and algorithms that feed into the confirmation bias of the user.

To teach college students about fake news, then, we chose to focus our workshop on social media and the sharing of news stories. As social media is relevant in the life of virtually every young adult, we believed using this frame would give them a way to lessen the impact of fake news in their own lives while cultivating mindful practices as they consume information online.

Getting the Word Out

Attendees received credit through the college's "Passport" program, which requires students to go to a certain number of outside-the-classroom events each year. This added incentive encouraged students who may not otherwise have attended.

We also promoted the event through the library's social media pages, email, flyers on campus, and OrgSync messages.
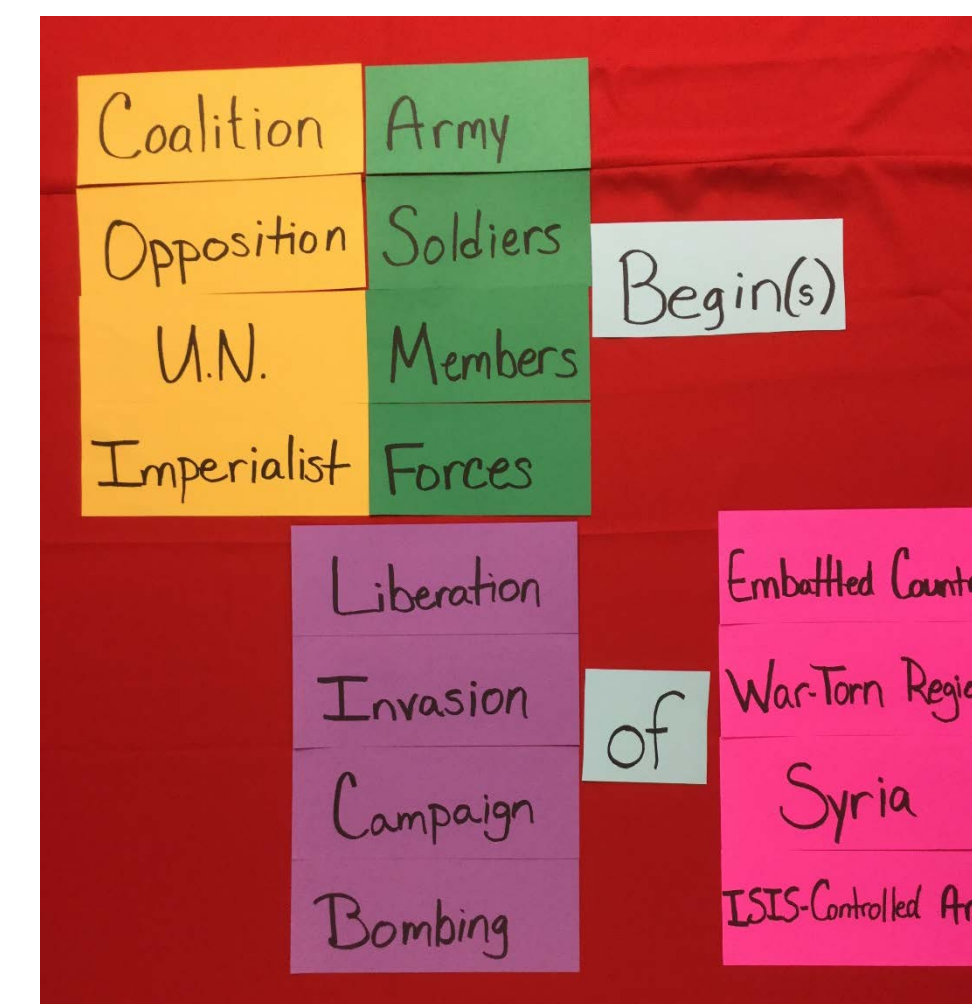
Workshop Activities

Creating Headlines: Words Matter

- Objective: Students will describe the purpose of a headline and how word choice can alter the overall tone of a headline.

- Each student chooses a word from four synonyms, ranging from neutral to sensational, in order to build a headline.

- Outcome: Students see how small changes in word choice can have a dramatic effect on a reader's expectation of a news story.

Evidence & Sources: What Makes a Source Trustworthy?

- In this discussion-based activity, students consider the concept of trustworthiness. We introduce some questions they should ask, as well as useful tools, online and in-person, to help them determine if a story is share-worthy.

- **Questions to consider:**
  - What evidence is used to support the claims in the article?
  - How is the evidence used?
  - What criteria can we use to evaluate a source of information?
  - What types of sources do journalists typically use?
  - When are anonymous sources acceptable?

- **Tools to Use:**
  - Politifact (http://www.politifact.com)
  - Snopes (http://www.snopes.com)
  - B.S. Detector (http://bsdetector.tech/)
  - Roux Library Librarians

Visual Literacy: Be the Editor

- Objective: Students will consider how images accompanying an article can encourage a certain interpretation or bias, add information, or otherwise affect our understanding of the story.

- Students select one image from a series to associate with a particular headline. As a group, the class discusses what each of the images communicates about the story, such as bias or helpful information, and how it would affect the readers' reception of the story.

Image Activity
UK to Start 'Brexit' on March 29 by Invoking Article 50

Analyzing Articles

- Students apply the skills learned thus far to determine the potential bias in each of three different articles on vegetarianism (from the North American Vegetarian Society, Medline Plus, and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals).

- **Questions to consider:**
  - Can you identify the author? If so, who is this person? What is their education? Could they be considered an authority? Why/why not?
  - Is there an organization in charge of the site's content or funding? Might the sponsor encourage the author(s) to present slanted information? If so, in what ways does that reduce/increase the likelihood that the article is biased?

Student Feedback

What was the most interesting thing you learned today?
- "There are websites that can inform you automatically to something suspicious, and spotting can sometimes be pretty obvious if you know what to look for."

How will you apply what you learned in your own information sharing habits?
- "If I came across something that is too shocking or silly… I will most likely share it with an asterisk or warning."